

LETTER FROM A MOVIE-MAKER

"Crossfire" as a Weapon Against Anti-Semitism

DORE SCHARY

SIR: To begin with, and not as apology but because the credit must go where credit is due, let me say *Crossfire* was produced by Adrian Scott, directed by Edward Dmytryk, and written by John Paxton.

As Executive in Charge of Production at RKO Studios, I made contributions to it, stimulated its production, and presented it with pride as a contribution from our studio and the industry to a better world that, one day, we all hope, will be free of blind hatred, intolerance, and ignorance.

Crossfire is doing remarkably good business to very appreciative audiences all through America. It has been received with glowing and exciting notices by all but a very few critics. The mail we've received, and the preview cards totalling some 2200 individual opinions, are about 93 per cent enthusiastic and approving. Of the remain-

AMID the chorus of comment, mostly favorable, that greeted the movie *Crossfire*, Hollywood's first serious attempt to deal with the problem of anti-Semitism, Elliot E. Cohen, in his article "Letter to the Movie-Makers" in the August COMMENTARY, recorded the misgivings of himself and others about the film and Hollywood's crusade against race-hatred. DORE SCHARY, who here replies to Mr. Cohen, is Executive Vice-President in Charge of Production at the RKO Radio Studios in Hollywood, which made *Crossfire*; at 42, he is one of the youngest top executives in the movie industry. Mr. Schary was born in Newark, New Jersey, and was an actor and director in the legitimate theater before going to Hollywood, where his talent for scenario writing brought him an Academy Award (for *Boys Town*, 1938) and eventually led to his becoming a producer. It is part of Mr. Schary's creed as a movie-maker that the movies can be one of the greatest instruments for bettering the world—without forsaking their function as entertainment.

ing 7 per cent, some 5 per cent are cautious and apprehensive, and the last 2 per cent are anti-Semitic in character, varying from casual social anti-Semitism to the violent species. *Crossfire* was never intended to convert the violent anti-Semite. It was intended to insulate people against violent and virulent anti-Semitism.

From general audience reaction and comment we believe it will do the job of insulation very effectively.

This is the background.

Now to a step by step answer to your letter.

You begin by reciting quite accurately the plot of *Crossfire*.

You then say that most of the professors, psychiatrists, and psychologists who have seen *Crossfire* agree that it might do good—that it might reaffirm the opinions of the liberal—that it might move slightly anti-Semitic people into the liberal camp.

This is what we aimed at. It is not a definitive picture aimed at readjusting the real anti-Semite. No one picture, nor one book, nor one group of professionals, has succeeded or can succeed in achieving that Nirvana. The job is tied up to the great and intricate problem of the new world of peace and understanding.

Anti-Semitism is, as you say, a complex problem and our film was calculated to attack one part of the problem only: to insulate against hate while other factors were brought to bear against other lines in the complex pattern.

You then propound what is your basic fear—that the picture will promote anti-Semitism. You propound this fear by reciting how it might be interpreted or enjoyed by an anti-Semite. A violent, unreasoning anti-Semite

needs no *Crossfire* to set into motion his hate and prejudice and misconceptions. He has been fed by direct anti-Semitic pamphlets, programs and pogroms. The point you overlook is that *Crossfire* has not been made by Gerald L. K. Smith to titillate his lunatic fringe audiences. The Jew haters have ample material of lies and hate to feed their audience to a point of regurgitation. I don't think this film would be popular at certain rallies, and I doubt if it will be sponsored by certain groups.

Now we come to your fears about the "Judas theme." This question was specially asked at previews held in three cities, and almost 92 per cent approved completely the ending, the trap, and understood the motive of LeRoy. The remaining 8 per cent fell into two groups which argued about whether Montgomery (the killer) should have wound up in jail or whether he should have reformed. Nowhere in any of the answers was there an expression of your "Judas" fear. They all hated Montgomery and enjoyed his getting two bullets in his hide. And adolescents particularly, accustomed to Western gunplay, understood and enjoyed the villain getting knocked off by expert gunplay executed by a right guy wearing the equivalent of a Sheriff's badge.

Now to the characterization of Montgomery.

Again you make the error of seeing this only through the eyes of the anti-Semite. To the American audiences polled, he is cowardly (he runs), a double-crosser (he kills his best friend), he hates "civilian" soldiers (who comprised perhaps 95 per cent of our armed forces), and he is sweaty and sloppy (no bobby-soxer virtue for heroes).

Now to the Jew and his characterization. In my years of study and practical experience in the field of anti-Semitism, there is no characterization that overcomes the fear you express, because the Jew is labeled as something reprehensible by the anti-Semite, no matter what he happens to be.

If the Jew fights (Barney Ross, Benny Leonard, and a host of others have fought well and expertly), he is a dirty fighter, yel-

low in the clinch, and very tricky in an Oriental way.

If the Jew is poor, they all are Communists. If the Jew is rich, they all are dirty bankers. If the Jew is happily married, they're clannish, selfish, and, anyway, they have Gentile mistresses. If the Jew is single or divorced, they all are libertines or homosexuals. If the Jew was in the Army, he was goldbricking—if he wasn't, he's a slacker. If he was an officer, he bought his commission—if a private, he avoided doing his job. If the Jew is communicative, he's a butinsky. If he's uncommunicative, he's stuck up and thinks he's smarter than anybody else. If he works for a boss, he's a cheat and plotting to take away the business. If he is a boss, he's a miser and a crook.

These opinions are like everything else about anti-Semitism: absurd. It is equally absurd and surprising that you give them credence in your open letter. No matter what the Jew had been in *Crossfire*, the anti-Semite would have read something evil into his character.

Now you say that *Crossfire* is liable to stimulate actual open and violent anti-Semitism. In setting this up, you are guilty of your first inaccuracy. Our soldiers do not "unite in an out-of-hand execution of one of their number." They protect Mitch, one of their buddies, and one of them helps lay a trap for a man, Montgomery, who he realizes is a murderer of two men. Would that all American citizens were willing to cooperate as courageously in the apprehension of all criminals. The laissez-faire attitude of the American citizen toward the laws of his country is an attitude that has always disturbed officers of law enforcement.

Your next point, expressed by some in the American Jewish Committee, claims that there is no record of a Jew killed because he is a Jew. How do you know?

As a boy, I lived in what was practically a ghetto section of Newark, New Jersey. I was punched and beaten many times because I was a Jew. Boys were killed in gang fights—the record says because of gang violence—

the underlying motive was anti-Semitism, or anti-Catholicism, or anti-something.

Only recently the Associated Press carried a story that a Jewish storekeeper was killed by two hoodlums. No robbery took place. No motive was established.

I once saw a waiter killed by a man. As the man hit him, he called him "a lousy Jew." The fact that the waiter wasn't Jewish didn't change the hate behind the man who threw the punch; also, it didn't make the waiter less dead. The man who punched was booked on a murder charge—no motive was necessary—the waiter was so very dead, and people had seen the violence.

So again—how do you know?

Of course, you don't yell fire in a crowded movie house, but if there is a fire, you do something about it before somebody gets burned. And you certainly don't yell "candy and popcorn." The point is, people *have* been burned in theaters. Marking "Exits," having fire hoses, and asking people to walk rather than run in case of fire, do not seem to have given fire prevention authorities fears about inducing fire hysteria.

Further, in relation to your remarks about lynchings—if you will check the graphs and records of lynchings, you will learn that they have always decreased as people have protested vehemently against them.

Now as to your "West Coast psychologist": he forgets that in the years since 1931 some six million people have been killed because they were Jews. A world horrified by the slaughter fought against Nazism. They didn't side with Hitler. If your thesis about *Crossfire* stimulating violence was true, the spectacle of all those sad, dead six million would have raised enough violence to have had us all butchered.

The only confusion about *Crossfire*, I must say, seems to be articulated by you, not by the audiences who have seen it and who have expressed themselves with complete clarity on the subject; they like the picture and understand it.

Yes, Mr. Cohen, I know that anti-Semitism is a serious problem, and we have approached it with knowledge and experience

as workers in the field and as picture-makers. We do not sail uncharted seas. We have said these things on platforms, in army camps, in schools and in debate.

YOUR next point we have already discussed. *Crossfire* was not made to cure anti-Semitism. It was made to insulate against anti-Semitism. (Incidentally, it was not made to advertise Lucky Strike cigarettes, a subject with which you seem abnormally preoccupied.)

You then discuss the function of the cinema. You speculate—we do not. *Crossfire* is doing big business, and people are going to see it, knowing what it is about. If the cinema reverts to only the sedative function you wish it to perform, it will stagnate. Good art is stimulated by provocative ideas and by a challenge, and audiences are demanding this kind of motion picture.

We now approach the part of your letter which is insulting and smug, because you say that "motion pictures have never accepted any responsibility to anything except the box office." I name *Best Years Of Our Lives*, *Mr. Smith Goes To Washington*, *Confessions Of A Nazi Spy*, *Fury*, *Grapes Of Wrath*, *I Am A Fugitive From A Chain Gang*, *Hallelujah*, *The Crowd*, and *Joe Smith, American* as samples of motion pictures made with something of a social responsibility on the minds of the people who made them.

Hollywood is no longer in the nickelodeon stage—only some of its critics.

You sum up your indictment of Hollywood progress by insulting terms such as "half-baked," "pious," and "catchpenny."

We've been called a great variety of bad names, and go about our business of trying to make better pictures hoping that in time our harsh critics will stop writing open letters that often are ill-considered and injudicious.

The term "morons" you used—we never use it. Probably we give our audiences a greater vote of confidence than you do with some of your fears and irresolutions.

We did not polish *Crossfire* off in a couple

of story conferences as you charge. I have been wrapped up in this problem since I've been Jewish, 42 years last August 31. We consulted more than one expert in the making of *Crossfire*. We talked to many. We do not operate in an intellectual vacuum; on the other hand, we don't favor intellectual anarchy. If we had accepted all the reservations of the experts, we would have compromised and inhibited and vitiated a picture that right now seems to be doing the job it was aimed at doing.

The motion picture art contains many people of wide and varied experience and education.

▷ We have the things you imply we lack—knowledge, imagination, and art.

However, sometimes, we lack the gall of some of our critics.

We are working at our job. To us, and to audiences, *Crossfire* was part of our job. I am very proud we made it.

Sincerely yours,
DORE SCHARY

Dore Schary, "Letter to Elliot Cohen from a Movie-Maker," Commentary 4:3 (September 1947).